A MEDITATION ON RETURNING TO WORK
JONAH 1:1-17
AUGUST 6, 1972

Before World War II began, A British scientist had a premonition that there would soon appear an international conflict which would place his own country in great jeopardy. And so this British scientist quit his job, liquidated all his assets, and moved his family to a remote and pleasant little island in the Pacific. The only problem was, the name of the island was Bataan. (The Protestant Hour, 6/11/72 Dr. W. A. Holmes)

Life has a way of doing that to all of us. That is the point of the Jonah story: that is "the sign of Jonah." No matter where we go: no matter how creatively we plan to escape from the reality of life: sooner or later we get caught again. But before we think about Jonah I'd like to punctuate his experience with a recent one of my own.

We spent three weeks in July at Cape May Point, New Jersey: a very small community at the very end of the Jersey penninsula that has absolutely nothing going for it but the ocean. To the North lie 100 miles of gaudy, noisy play-ground and wildwood. Avalon, Ocean City, Atlantic City: miles of expensive motels, boardwalks, amusement parks, night clubs, crowded beaches, shops,movies. Cape May Point has a light house, one small grocery store, about 200 homes - most of them inhabited by permanent families, and a summer retreat center for a Catholic order of nuns: which means that if you're looking for novelty and excitement you are limited to watching the nuns take their evening walk along the beach.

Cape May Point met all of our criteria for a family vacation: but one evening as I was enjoying the darkness and a silence broken only by the roar of the surf, I heard a shout from the beach behind our house which sounded like: "Stop! Police!" Immediately I heard someone running very fast beside the house and by the time I got outside I saw a policeman in pursuit of a man. As they disappeared into the night the policeman shouted again and a shot rang out. As it turned out the man was arrested, and had been spending his evening peeping through the windows of the cottages along the beach.

Besides the excitement it was a rather eleoquent intrusion of reality into the dream world we were experiencing. Even there - in Cape May Point there were problems: people with problems: policemen with guns that need, on occasion, to be fired. And I think it was at that point - in the middle of our second week that I began to experience the tension between the thorough enjoyment of a relaxed life style with no demands and the gnawing

awareness that pleasant as it was, real life was still happening out there - and that if my life makes any sense at all, it is out there all wrapped up with the lives of other people and deeply involved in the issues that matter to them and all of us. On occasion I've lamented the fact - as I am certain you have too - that I was not born a very wealthy man, because I could live beside the sea - alone for quite some time. And yet I know, when I'm honest with myself, that it wouldn't work: that vacations are for re-creating and not permanent living: that insulated life is really very sterile, and besides, there is probably no where in the world one could go without a "peeping tom" getting shot in the front yard - or getting swallowed by a fish - as was the case with another vacationer long ago.

Thus a meditation on returning to work: and my choice of a text - for as I sat down to the reality of preparing a sermon after a four week respite I felt a real affinity with Jonah - the perenial vacationer: the reluctant servant of the Lord.

Let's look again at Jonah. We've heard the story since we were children. Unfortunately all we heard - or all we remembered - was the first chapter, and when we gained a little intellectual maturity we didn't know what to do with that. In the words of an Old Testament Professor, "The one thing more incredible than the story of a fish swallowing a man, is a man swallowing the story of a fish swallowing a man." We know, yet still hesitate to tell our children, that the story was not intended to be taken as a literal fact of history. It is a story - a parable, written by an anonymous author in the past - exile period of Isrelite history. That is, in the period when Israel was a bout the job of reordering her national life after a generation of existing in Babylonian captivity. The story of Jonah had a great deal to say to those people at that time about their relationship with God, with their Gentile neighbors, and their God - given mission to the world. As Jonah plays out his part with God and the people of Ninevah, - the ancient Jewish readers would have said "Hey, he's talking about us!" And today, that reaction is still appropriate. To read the whole story honestly is, in fact, to realize that he's still talking about us - and our relationship with God, and the people of Ninevah whoever they are for us - and our mission in the world.

The story bears repeating. God told Jonah to go to Nenivah - to live there perhaps: to be there: and to warn the peole of Ninevah that unless they changed their ways there

would be trouble ahead. But Jonah didn't want to go. Not, I think, because he minded being the prophet of doom: for, later in the story it does that part of the job with a vengeance. Jonah just didn't want to go to Ninevah: to the city - the center of life. And so he boarded a ship to Tarshish - in the words of the author, to get "away from the presence of the Lord."

Poor Jonah. That made no more sense than my assumption that real life doesn't happen in Cape May Point. Thoreau, you will recall, went to jail because he couldn't escape the reality of taxes on his precious little vacation spot called Walden.

In any case, Jonah confronted the storm and the anxiety of the crew and even volunteered to be thrown over - which means that he preferred drowning to going to Ninevah. But no such luck, the reality of life interceeded again in the form of the fish. Now what does one do in the belly of a fish? Jonah prayed - but not the desperate prayer we might expect. In fact Jonah's prayer, uttered in that unusual environment is a rather pious and traditional rubric dealing with God's mercy and goodness. Never once did he try to strike a bargain: "get me out and I'll go to Ninevah". And it occurs to me that even the belly of the fish was preferable to the task God had assigned him. After all, it was warm and quiet, perhaps something like Freud had in mind when he suggested that we would all really like to return to the womb.

Again, no such luck. The fish delivered Jonah to dry land: God called again, and this time Jonah went, perhaps sensing the futility of his efforts to escape. He went: he did his job so successfully that the entire city - from king on down, repented, dawning sack cloth and ashes. Whereupon Jonah retired to a hill outside the city to watch the fireworks. Ninevah was the cause of all his problems: he had told them - but good: and now he didn't mind sitting back and watching while they got theirs.

God, however, changed his mind and spared the city. That made Jonah angry. As he stewed over his disappointment a plant grew and made him shade. The next day the plant died and left Jonah exposed to the hot sun and sultry wind, with the Ninevites prospering in the valley below. And it was morethan he could take: his anger and frustration exploded and he asked God to die.

Again, no such luck. And the story ends with God patiently reminding Jonah that if he

could care so much about a plant and his own comfort, certainly he could understand why God should care so much about the people of Nineveh. He said - in a classic rejoinder after all of Jonah's histrionics: "And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

That's the end of Jonah. We don't know whether he came down from the hill and began to live his life in the reality of Nineveh, or whether he boarded another ship to get away again from the unpleasantness of the life God had called him to live. I don't know what happened to Jonah, but I do know that the story had a great deal of relevance to me last week, and that it has an eduring message for all of us - whether we are going on vacation, coming reluctantly back from vacation, or simply spending an inordinate amount of our time wishing we were somewhere other than where we are.

All of us would like to escape from the tough reality of living in a very complex world as disciples of Jesus Christ. Some of us want to get away from it all so badly that we take the next ship to Tarshish. Let me cite two rather immediate examples - politics and ethics.

Every election year is important, but this one seems to be emerging as a radically important year in terms of the future course of our nation. As we think about the issues and make decisions about condidates we do so as Christians, as people whose first allegiance is to Jesus Christ, and his first priority is to live as he would have us live. The issues are important and complex: they have to do with the economy, foreign policy, welfare reform: good and articulate and committed people are on both sides. And it is very tempting to do one of two things - both of which are ships to Tarshish: to shuck our Christian discipleship and make our decisions on the basis of economic self interest, prejudice, or tradition. That is not to say that honest Christians will all vote the same way. It is to say that an honest Christian must learn to think politically out of the context of his religious faith. The second ship to Tarshish is to not think, notlisten, not discuss and not vote - because it's just to complex. Like Jonah we are called to live with the present realities of life - and in this year of our Lord 1972 the most urgent of those realities is political.

The second example of the complexity of reality - from which we would like to escape

is ethical. My, it would be comfortable to be able to live by the simple moral formulas of the past. One of the books I worked on while I was away is "Christian Ethics in a Permissive Society" by William Barclay. A fine book: but once again I was impressed with the immense complexity of living today as an honest Christian. Once again I was impressed with the need for the Church to deal with the ethical dilemmas of contemporary life again and again and again - not by handing out simple little answers, but first by taking the questions very seriously,and second by providing a community of non-judgemental love in which individuals can work through their questions and concerns with integrity.

But the ship to Tarshish is in port - in fact two ships. One sails to moral anarchy and promises freedom under the guise of "anything goes." The other promises security in the form of a list of "do's and don't's" and a rigid ethical code that presumes to know what is right and wrong in every situation. Both are escapes from the complexity of the life God calls us to live.

Finally, it has been said that the Book of Jonah is the most Christian of all the Old Testament literature. God's love for all men is part of the Jonah story. The mission of the people of God is part of the story. But what really places it in the category of pre-Christian literature is this relentless insistance that God calls us to live ~~our~~ lives fully in the world. What's really at the heart of the story is God's love for the world - not just the vacation spots, those quiet, picturesque places like Cape May Point: but the Ninevah's - the cities like Washington and Indianapolis and Lafayette. God loves that world so much that he came into it. the incarnation happened - not on a lonely hillside, or by the ocean - but in a cow barn in the middle of a census. God's coming among us happened ultimately, not in an out-of-the way place, but on a garbage heap right outside a major metropolis - on a hill called golgotha.

That's what the Jonah story is about. And it forces each of us to the uncomfortable edge of decision. Where will do our living? Will we pay our fare and board those comfortable ships for Tarshish? Or will we give ourselves to the task of living as honest, joyful Christians in real world where God calls us to be? AMEN!

Father, we're grateful for the opportunity to be away from life. But we're even more grateful for the privilege of living as your people - here in this place, today. Be with us - in Jesus name. AMEN